KILCOYNE

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ACHILL

by

Rev. Anthony Kilcoyne

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Introduction

Over the years, Ireland has become familiar to people throughout the world.

In this "Emerald Isle", the County of Mayo has a magnificent coastline, and a splendid off-shore island, named Achill. This large island (15 by 12 miles) has attracted tourists for well over a hundred years. Although the Islanders are proud of its position on the map and its cultural identity, it is separated from the mainland only by a narrow sea-passage, at Achill Sound.

The "Sound" was bridged in 1886, through the efforts of Michael Davitt, a Mayo man of Land League fame. "Davitts Bridge" takes visitors to the beaches, cliffs, whitewashed villages, guest houses, hotels and its unmistakable way of life.

There is an old Mayo saying: If one could live on scenery, Mayo would be the richest county in Ireland and nowhere is this more obvious than in Achill Island. Visitors to Achill for the first time, tell us that they experience a thrill of expectancy at the prospect of exploring this island.

When Paul Henry R.H.A. came to live for some years in Achill (c. 1913), he writes in his book "An Irish Portrait", "What attracted me above all. was the wild beauty of the landscape, of the colour and variety of the cloud formations, one of the especial glories of the West of Ireland". Again, he tells us, "I have often loved to live near the sea and now the sound of the sea and the cry of the seagulls are always in my ears".

Islanders living at home or abroad have always felt a deep love for their homeland, despite at times, famine, poverty and emigration. That love and tender dreams of long ago, is celebrated in songs and poems, reviving memories of boglands, mountain glens and green boreens. For them, time is powerless to alter the dream pictures of memory. Home to these exiles is always home as they left it, home unchanged, home untouched by time.

Here are a few verses taken from the booklet "Achill Songs and Poetry".

"The islands of Ireland on lake and on sea
Have a magic and a charm, they're steeped in history
But of all these lovely islands, the pearl of the sea
Is that island, Achill Island, home, sweet home to me.

That's the place where I was born many, many years ago
In those days when emigration forced the young and old to go,
And I'm hoping, and I'm praying to return and feel free
On that island, Achill Island, home, sweet home to me".

John McNamara, N.T., Dooagh.

The Isle of the Eagle

Isle of the Eagle,farewell to thy mountains,
With all their bright blossoms of purple and gold.
No more shall I sit by their murmuring fountains,
Nor from their bold heights the Atlantic behold.

Author unknown.

Percy French conveys the same sentiments in his poem "The Exile".

"Once more the fresh Atlantic breeze
Its friendly greeting cries
Afar across the azure seas,
The cliffs of Achill rise,
And, cloudless, countless pageantries
Sweep thro the sunlit skies.

So when, along the Achill Sound,
The summer sunset gleams
And when the heather bells are found
Beside the mountain streams
I'll seek thy shore and live once more
Oh! Island of my dreams!"

Chapter I

OUR PARISH OF ACHILL

As a youth, growing up in Keel, I had heard of a book written by Father Patrick Joyce, dealing with Achill Island, called "A Forgotten Part of Ireland". I had never come across a copy of this book, although I certainly longed to find one. When I visited San Francisco, U.S.A., in the Summer of 1958, to my great joy, a copy of the book was given to me, as a gift, by James Mullen of Curraune.

From this book, I learned that Father Joyce had come to Achill on his first mission appointment in 1908. Up to that time, he tells us, that his only acquaintance with the island was through an old school geography, which helped him find its position on the map. After his first and hasty survey of the island, he thought it anything but interesting. He remembered how he discovered the first scrap of information on its past, which he found in "The Battle of the Faith in Ireland". Then one day, he discovered a copy of the "Achill Herald", dated October 31st 1844. He learned that the "Achill Herald" was a journal printed and published in this far-off island. It was started as far back as July 1837. The paper ran into the nineties. For a long time, he searched in vain for other copies until to his great joy, he came across a complete file in Trinity College Library, Dublin. Meantime however, he learned from the old men of the island, a grand pathetic story of a famishing people. It was the story of a battle won! Yes, in this forgotten part of Ireland, unknown to the outside world, many whose cries were drowned in the wail of the ocean, poured out their lives for Ireland's faith, died and were buried where they fell.

"Unwept, unhonoured and unsung".

He longed to do something towards preserving and publishing their story. He sought every opportunity of speaking to those eye-witnesses and actors of the events described. It was a labour of love for him to hear them relate and for him to record all they felt and all they saw.

I will try to make known to the readers of this booklet some of the things he learned during his stay on the island. With grateful thanks to Father Joyce, I do so, lest we should forget the trials, sufferings and courage of our forebearers.

The life of Edward Nangle, the "Apostle of Achill", obviously prejudiced but valuable for its historical data, as well as the "Achill Herald" enabled him to check the stories of the old people. So far, he gained a fairly adequate view of events, as far back as 1834, when Mr. Nangle came to the island. But he wished to continue his search.

He knew that Father Manus Sweeney, a native of Achill Island, had figured in the rebellion of '98, for which he paid the penalty of his young life. Having appealed to the Rector of the Irish College in Paris, where Father Manus Sweeney was educated and ordained, he was informed that due to the "Revolution", the records, with many other precious things, had been swept away. To his great satisfaction however, a little book printed about the year 1800 found its way into his hands from the O'Donnell Library, Newport House, Newport. This book or document contains valuable references to the young Achill priest, which will be reproduced in the following pages. In a supplement to O'Donovan's Four Masters is a family history of the O'Donnells, who were proprietors of Achill Island, during the first half of the century just past. Further, the State papers and Knox's History of Mayo gave the facts in the story of Grainne Uaile or Grace O'Malley, a great Irish sea-queen of the sixteenth century, who came of a royal Celtic line, members of which long possessed Achill Island. These, as well as the ordinary history and literature of the time, provided him with material for his book "A Forgotten Part of Ireland".

Chapter II

THE ANCIENT KINGDOM OF ACHILL AND UMHALL

The ancient kingdoms of Achill and Umhall comprised all the territory named the Baronies of Burrishoole and Murrisk which skirted Clew Bay, from Achill Island in the north to Killary Harbour in the south. Achill was the name given to the mountainous portion, which included St. Patrick's Reek. Umhall was the name given to the lowlands. To this kingdom, two roads from the east were filled with pilgrims to the Reek and merchants to Westport and Burrishoole "whose large lough was full of great timber, grey marble and many other commodities". This commerce, however, did not long survive the establishment of English government in Connaught in the sixteenth century.

In this Bay of Clew the ancient family of the O'Malleys ruled for centuries, and Grace, the greatest of them all, ruled it on land and sea.

Here in Clare Island, Murrisk and Burrishoole, the Dominicians, the Augustinians and the Carmelites, chanted by the sea. The ancient Abbey of Burrishoole, like those of Murrisk and Clare Island, seems to have been an O'Malley foundation, dating back to that golden age in Connaught. Here too in a momentous period of Irelands history fought and fell in defence of Celtic laws, many of the Burkes of northern Connaught. Alas, it was all in vain, for the vandals of Elizabeth triumphed, and Bingham during "his ten terrible years in Connaught", slaughtered the innocents and left the footprints of his tyranny there. The monks were gradually driven from their quiet places of prayer and the lonely, roofless abbeys around Clew Bay mourn their fate.

"Yet still beneath the hallowed soil
The peasant rests him from his toil,
And dying bids his bones be laid
Where erst his simple fathers prayed".

Yes, there hangs a glory over Clew Bay that will never fade, over the ancient Kingdom of Achill and Umhall. Such was Achill and Umhall in days that are gone but today the name, with other things peculiar to old-time Ireland, has taken refuge in the little island in the Atlantic, separated from the mainland, as already mentioned, by a narrow strip of water. But of this, more in the next chapter.

Chapter III

ACHILL ISLAND

We come now to Achill Island, which can boast of the grandest and wildest scenery in our Western Isles. At the time that Father Joyce came to Achill in 1908, the only language of many of the people was Irish or Gaelic.

"Achill! land of moor and mountain,
Queen of islands bold and free,
Silvered o'er with lakes and fountains,
Rushing on to meet the sea.

Achill! where from dizzy summits
Many a swooping eagle soars.
Achill! where too deep for plummet
Loud the wild Atlantic roars."

H. G. Knapp (c. 1870)

It is supposed to derive its name from the eagles that once made their haunts around the tops of its wild and picturesque mountains. In the island itself, 35,000 acres in extent, as well as on the mainland adjoining it, there are several hills of considerable height. Four of these, Corraun, Sliabh More, Croaghaun and Minaun, are the glory of Achill and seem to account in a large measure for the extraordinary love of its people, as I have already mentioned, for their island home. Corraun, the only one of the four on the mainland, which is only a short distance from the island, is 1,750 feet high and commands a magnificent view of Clew bay, with its numerous islands, especially Clare Island, home of Grainne Uaile, or Grace O'Malley.

Sliabh More or Slievemore within the island itself at its northwestern extremity, justifies its name of "Great Mountain".

This mountain shelters from the bleak Atlantic storms a beautiful village called Dugort, also the "Colony", which calls for further mention. Not far from Dugort there are megalithic remains or stone monuments and the famous seal caves at the back of Slievemore Mountain. Croaghaun is memorable as the scene, where for upwards of twenty years lived the notorious Captain Boycott, whose name has become one of the useful and expressive words of the English language.

Croaghaun, which is almost 2000 feet high, has some of the finest cliff scenery in Europe.

"Mighty Croaghaun heavenward towering
From the bay of Keem below
Rears its crest with heather flowering,
'Neath the western sunbeams glow.

O'er its peak with moss grown heavy,
Storms have swept for ages past.
Yet still in full primeval glory
It mocks the whirlwinds blast."

Knapp

Saddle Head and Achill Head are close by.

"Achillhead, where bellows breaking,
Roar in fury from the main
Sounds like distant thunder waking
E'er the echo dies again.

Massive fabric, how stupendous
Is the grandeur of the view,
Thousand rocks and cliffs tremendous,
Sparkling foam and waters blue."

Knapp

The Minaun Cliffs are situated on the south side of the island. The wild goats which once leaped over the mountain (1570 feet), seem to have given the cliffs a name. For Minaun is the Irish name for kids or young goats.

"Here the Minaun Cliffs uplifted
Fling their shades from pile to pile
Down fantastic chasms rifted
Like an old cathedral's aisle.

At the foot of these cliffs, part of which are known as the Cathedral Rocks, is the Keel Strand, stretching for two miles to the village of the same name.

"Peaceful in the vale extended
Lies the loveliest of all strands,
Keel, whose azure waves are blended
With a blaze of golden sands."

Cathedral Cliffs

The Cathedral Rocks are so called because their arches and rugged pillars give the idea or impression of a cathedral.

Minaun is very interesting for many reasons. Achill was divided by the people into Upper Achill and Lower Achill and Minaun stands between. Tourists to Achill often climb to the top of Minaun. Starting from the village of Dooega, the ascent is not too difficult. To the left, there is the magic of the great sea, while to the right under Minaun, there is the beautiful valley of Mweelin. This was once a seat of learning, which the natives called "Trinity College" and to which I may have occasion to return later. On the top of Minaun, there is now a television mast and an access road to the left, not far from Achill Sound. As we continue the ascent from the village of Dooega, a path leads us over the mountain and beside it at regular intervals, there are little monuments of stone, the purpose of which at the time, Father Joyce was unable to understand. On making further enquiries, however, from the locals he learned that this mountain was the great highway between upper and lower Achill. Marriages were sometimes contracted between parties, one of which belonged to lower Achill and the other to upper Achill and, as each section had its own church so too, its own proper cemetery. Accordingly, when one of the parties died beyond the mountain, his or her relatives insisted on the burial taking place in the family graveyard. The funeral procession was then seen to wend its way over Minaun Mountain by this pathway: and these curious stone monuments were resting places for those who carried the coffin. I witnessed a short time ago, a "simulated" funeral procession by priests and people from the Dookinella side to Dooega. Such is Achill Island, whose story we wish to tell.

On the eastern side of the island at Kildownet is a small castle of the famed Grainne Uaile or Grace O'Malley. A special chapter will now be devoted to the fair fame of this Grace O'Malley to show that she was a real historical heroine to be remembered in Achill and in Ireland.

Chapter IV

GRAINNE UAILE OR GRACE O'MALLEY

Grace O'Malley, whose small castle "Kildownet" in Achill Island and many other venerable monuments of a similar kind around Clew Bay still plead haughtily even in their ruins, for glories that are gone, lives in story, after a fashion, in the West of Ireland, as a wonderful woman, who fought for her land and her country. Her name, however, is sadly being relegated to the region of myth and oblivion among people generally. How sad it should be so. Her enemies, however, have not considered it unworthy of notice.

Her life sketch is told in history in a few brief sentences by Elizabethan deputies and governors of Munster and Connaught, who found her a very troublesome rebel, in their work of subduing Ireland.

In 1576, she came with other notabilities of Connaught to Sir Henry Sidney to Galway having, he tells us, "three galleys and two hundred fighting men" and he describes her as a "most famous feminine sea captain". In 1578, writing at Leighlin, Co. Carlow, Lord Justice Drury calls her "Graine Nymaille a woman of the Province of Connaught governing a country of the O'Flahertys, famous for her stoutness of courage and person and for sundry exploits done by her by sea." He also adds she was then a State prisoner. Not for long, however, as we shall see. Finally, Sir Richard Bingham in a brief character sketch he has left of the Irish sea-queen, as she appeared to the English eye, has done more for her fame than all others and has proved her, far from being a myth, to have been a formidable and consistent rebel all her life, when he declared her in 1593 "a notable traitress and nurse to all the rebellions in the province (of Connaught) for 40 years".

Every student of Irish history knows that the first Anglo-Norman chieftains and rulers who came to Ireland were after a brief antagonism, speedily absorbed by the Gael. They practised the same religion. They learned to speak the same language. They

wore the same dress. Some of them, says Spenser, "are degenerated and grow more Irish, yea and more malicious to the English, than the Irish themselves". England was alarmed to find that those sent to conquer in her name, fell in love with her enemies and made them stronger than before. So it was in 1367 to check this "shameful degeneracy" of the noble English, laws were passed but in vain. The absorption went on as before. Now, however, towards the end of the sixteenth century, Elizabeth determined to crush the Irish utterly. Sir Henry Sidney, Lord Justice, carrying out this policy, established governors in Munster and Connaught. Drury went to the southern province and Fitton to the west. Not satisfied with having the Irish under the yoke of her civil government, the Queen looked upon them as being but half conquered until they accepted her civil religion too. And now the trouble began, during which Grace O'Malley played her part. The Irish Catholics were alarmed. The Irish chieftains rebelled. The cause of religion was wedded to the cause of nationality. In the southern province, the Earl of Desmond, a faithful subject but a Catholic was the first to go. Only two years or so before, he had committed Grace O'Malley to Her Majesty's prison at Limerick. The English were now gathering round him. He sent letters to the Burkes of Connaught to win their aid. The Burkes were the Anglo-Norman successors of the O'Connor Kings in the west. The Clanrickards were lords in upper Connaught; the Clanwilliams were lords in the lower portion. In 1576, Grace had already married The MacWilliam as the chieftain of northern Connaught was called. The Burkes received Desmonds letters and handed them over to the English – all but Grace O'Malley and her husband, who called their followers to arms and forced Sir Nicholas Malbie, the President of Connaught, to return from Munster, where he was helping to crush Desmond. But it was all in vain. Desmond was defeated and slain. Very soon afterwards, in the words of the Four Masters, "the lowing of a cow or plowman's voice, was not heard from Dingle to Cashel". Such was the fate of the once wealthy and populous Province of Munster.

Nor did Connaught fare much better. Fitton and Malbie and

Bingham subdued it. Malbie, who according to the annals of Lough Key, placed all Connaught "in bondage", preceded Sir Richard Bingham, who arrived in 1584. In January 1586, he had seventy men and women hanged in Galway. The Burkes were in rebellion. Hag's Castle in Lough Mask was successfully defended against Bingham by the "Devil of Corraune" (he was an Achill man) and Walter Burke, the son-in-law and son of Grace O'Malley. "The Devil of Corraune" was owner of that wild peninsula of Corraune, near Achill Island. He was a fierce rebel and called, appropriately, we suppose, "The Devil of Corraune". His father never submitted to any English governor and bore the same name. In the year 1586, the two sons of Grace, Tibbot and Walter Burke, as well as the Devil of Corraune and Teigh Roe O'Malley of Kildownet Castle, are registered as rebels. Things looked bad for Grace. When Iron Dick, her husband, died, she went to live at Rockfleet Castle or Carrigahowley, where her son-in-law, the Devil of Corraune, seems to have been chieftain. Bingham invited her to come and live under his protection. She trusted his word and came. All her goods and chattels were seized and Sir Richard had erected a new gallows. Grace tells us "she feared it was her last funeral, where she thought to end her life".

At this time, however, the Devil of Corraune happened to be on good terms with Bingham and he succeeded in gaining her pardon. When the "Devil" again turned rebel, Grace had to fly to O'Neill and O'Donnell of Ulster and later managed to get her pardon in Dublin from Sir John Parrot, the Lord Lieutenant. Her name will be ever remembered in the West of Ireland. Whether Grace ever owned all those castles around Clew Bay that are now named after her, we have some doubts. She certainly must have had a wonderful influence from Killary to Achill Island, which impressed itself on the minds of the people at the time and their descendants.

Speaking of the vague traditions in the West, in which this heroine of the sixteenth century still lives, a distinguished historian quoted very appropriately the following:

"Her spirit wraps the dusky mountain,
Her memory sparkles o'er the fountain,
The meanest rill, the mightiest river,
Rolls mingling with her fame forever."

Enough has been said to show that she was no myth.

Chapter V

HOLY WELLS AND MASS ROCK OF ACHILL ISLAND

There is a holy well at Kildownet near the graveyard, which a tradition connects with a St. Damhnait or Dympna, the anglicised form of the Irish Damhnait. It was visited by pilgrims on the 15th of August in the time of Father Joyce, and perhaps also today. There is also one of more note at Slievemore, called after St. Colman. The Venerable Bede in his Ecclesiastical History (c.667) tells us that St. Colman "retired to a small island, which is to the west of Ireland and at some distance from its coast called in the language of the Scots (Irish) Inisbofinde the island of the White Heifer". When he arrived there, he built a monastery and placed in it the monks he had brought with him – Irish and Saxon monks. St. Colman left the Irish monks in possession of Inishboffin and went in search of a site for the Saxon brethren. He probably crossed over to Achill. He at length succeeded in founding a monastery at Mayo, which was called Mayo of the Saxons. When I was young, people made pilgrimages to St. Colman's well in Slievemore and probably do so today. About the year 1920, a local stonemason, Pat Corrigan, built a wall around this well. The third and last is situated in a scene of solitude and beauty close to the Cathedral Rocks at the end of Keel Strand. It is named St. Finan's Well. The well, however, is holy no more. Some "unknown" is said to have desecrated it and it dried up. Not far from this well is the site of the old Dookinella Church, where in 1835 Archbishop John McHale confirmed children and adults. "The first". according to the people of the time, "ever known to be held in Achill". The present Catholic Church was erected by Father O'Dwyer the same year in which he built Kildownet.

Pursuing the subject of these sacred ruins that speak of a Catholic past, we come now to the altar stones in Keem. Keem is an earthly paradise.

"How often in childhood we wandered,
Barefoot and happy and gay,
Or played in joyful contentment,
On the slopes of lovely Keem Bay.

Gerard Fadian, Keel.

Though Captain Boycott may have laid heavy hands on many things, to his credit be it told, he left this as he found it, a sacred relic of days that are gone.

The view from Keem on a fine day is truly magnificent.

"Now my eyes o'er Mayo wander,
Mark Croagh Patrick scale the sky,
Yes and Innisturk is yonder,
Yonder Shark and Boffin rise.

Yonder too in columns standing,
Rise those famous rocks the Bills,
Where the nestling puffins landing,
Through the storms for burrow drills.

A modern road now leads to Keem over high cliffs. As one descends, you get a view of the old Coastguard Station. At the back of this station, there is a field (at one time obviously cultivated) in which the Altar or Mass Rock stands. Here fugitive priests celebrated Holy Mass. It was renovated in recent years by some Dooagh men, through the influence of Sister Asicus of the Presentation Convent, Keel. Mass was offered here in the presence of people on at least two occasions by native priests, in the Summer of 1978.

"The Mass Rock! What a history of love and sorrow clings around that loved title. What a tragic tale it tells of ruined altars and ruined homes. How our hearts thrill with pride as we gaze at this monument telling of Ireland's sorrow and Ireland's glory".

Father Lockington S.J.

"When our Faith was banned by a tyrant law
And our altars in ruin lay:
When the blighting gloom of the penal night
Fell dark over freedoms day,
On this ledge this Sacred Host was laid,
And the hunted sagart here,
Offered up to Heaven the Holy Mass,
While the hounds of the law were near."

Brian O'Higgins

Across from the village of Dooagh to the north, there is a beautiful place, called Anach. When Darrell Figgis lived on the island, he called it "a secret place". Some of us in our youth called it "a lonely place".

Those who are fond of walking should not miss a trip to Anach and his poem will tell them why.

Anach

"There is no peace now however things go,
No peace where the ways of men ring loud,
Save in a secret place that I know,
Hidden as in a cloud.

All the high hills stand clustering round,
Arched to protect it from trouble and noise,
The great strong hills that sing without sound,
And speak with no voice.

There lies Caorog, the mute low lake
And Bun-na-freamha lying aloft,
Peacefully sleeping, or even if they wake,
Lapping low and soft.

Upon the high hill-tops the heather may be crying,
And over the hill-tops the voices of men are heard,
But here only water lapping and sighing,
Or the wail of a bird.

Peace, peace and peace from the inner heart of dream,
More full of wisdom than speech can tell,
Dropt like a veil round the show of things that seem
With an invisible spell.

Darrell Figgis.

Mass Rock, Keem

Chapter VI

FATHER MANUS SWEENEY

The French made several efforts to land a force in Ireland but as at historic Limerick one hundred years before, they succeeded in doing so, only after they were too late.

On the 22nd of August 1798, General Humbert landed at Killala's broad Bay with one thousand one hundred men. The news of his arrival roused the West and the "Races of Castlebar" struck momentary terror into the English forces. The triumph however of the Patriots of the West and the French was short-lived and the whole force, French and Irish, surrendered on the 8th of September to Cornwallis at Ballinamuck. In their brief interval of victory, Newport was captured by the French. The Catholic priest in the little town was Father Manus Sweeney. He was a native of Achill Island (his mother was Bridget Mulloy). Like all young priests of penal days, he was educated abroad and ordained in Paris. Some time after his ordination and return to Ireland, he was sent as Catholic Curate to Newport. It appears that during his time abroad he made acquaintances with French officers or soldiers, who afterwards came to Newport during the rebellion. There is no doubt he was heart and soul with the rebels. After the town had been recaptured, he was arrested and imprisoned. Due to the intervention of the Rev. Mr. Heron, the Protestant clergyman "who said it was too bad to have a priest tied up in the guardroom, that he should keep him safe in his house". Father Sweeney was handed over to the Protestant Clergyman, from whom he afterwards escaped. To throw more light on the liberation of Father Sweeney by Sir Neal O'Donnell, we quote the words of his defence recorded in the minutes: "It must appear," says counsel, "that after he made Sweeney the priest a prisoner, he was induced to let him go, from the representation made to him and the conviction that the consequences of detaining him would have been the sacrifice of the loyal inhabitants, by the rebels and the destruction of the town of Newport. Pratt".

For months he lay concealed after he fled to his native mountains in Achill. He was, at length, betrayed. His hiding place was made known to Major Bingham's soldiers and he was arrested. He was taken to Castlebar and condemned to die as a rebel leader. It was "fair day" in Newport, Monday, June 9th 1799, and the people for miles around were gathered into town. A line of soldiers kept the people in subjection. As the rude scaffold was being set up – an old wooden table and the market crane – and the common rope was produced, a natural impulse seemed to rouse the people to violence and to attempt the rescue of their priest. The priest turned to speak and spare his flock from destruction. In silence, men and women heard the last words of the priest they loved, while tears rolled down their cheeks, advising them, for the sake of their children, not to stir a hand for him, that this was the death God had willed, this was the death he wished to die. The horror and the grief of the parishioners for what they considered an unpardonable crime, one cannot attempt to describe. They were helpless, but firmly believed retribution should one day overtake those who did this deed, and all their sympathisers. Round their Winter firesides, the old story-tellers recalled the fate of Lyghtel on Tonragee Mountain, who is said to have insulted the priest as he was dying on the scaffold.

A short time afterwards, as Lyghtel went to look after his flocks on the mountain, he lost his way in the fog or darkness and was never seen alive again. A pile of stones on top of the mountain marks the spot where he is supposed to have starved and died. Father Sweeney was buried in the Abbey of Burrishoole, where his tombstone may still be seen – from which we learn that he was buried here with his father and mother, at the early age of thirty six. Burrishoole Abbey is a short distance from Newport, on the left hand side as you go towards Achill.

Close to the village of Dookinella, where Father Sweeney was born, there is now a striking memorial erected by the people of Achill and friends. It is of red granite from the Corraun Mountain, designed and carried out by Peter Grant, the Irish sculptor. It was

unveiled and blessed by Archbishop Walsh of Tuam and a native of Newport, in August 1944 in the presence of Father John Godfrey and other priests, many natives and visitors. Our own Irish soldiers formed the guard of honour!

Unveiling and blessing by Archbishop Joseph Walsh of the Memorial to Father Manus Sweeney, Dookinella, Achill, 13th August, 1944.

Chapter VII

THE ARRIVAL OF NANGLE 1834

Achill, said the writer of the life of Nangle, "has been for half a century the great battlefield of Protestantism in the West of Ireland". The Rev. Mr. Nangle was a native of Athboy, County Meath. His spirit was stirred within him as he saw the people of Achill Island "wholly given to idolatry" and he lost no time in landing his army of scripture readers, ably led by himself, as described by his biographer as the "chosen vessel to hold the torch of truth to the benighted Romanists in the west of Ireland".

He received from Sir Richard O'Donnell, then the proprietor of the island, one hundred and thirty acres of land around Slievemore and proceeded to lay the foundation of a Proselytizing institution. It was called the "Colony" or "Settlement" and was situated seven miles from Achill Sound under the shelter of the highest mountain in Achill. When his mission became known and appreciated, all the militant forces of Irish Catholics rose up in arms against him but he did succeed at last to gain a foothold. The outside world was told that the people still walked in darkness, worshipped a large white stone (the star) on Slievemore Mountain, never heard of the Grace of Redemption and two papist churches were filled with the victims of a degrading superstition and now only gold was necessary "that the light of divine truth should for the first time burst on the island". The purse strings of many a credulous English Protestant loosened at such an appeal. Money poured into the island and in a short space of time, there sprung up at Slievemore a small church, three commodious school rooms, a hospital, a kitchen for cooking for a hundred children, two dwelling houses for two clergymen, a stewards house and thirty thatched cottages large enough to hold twenty five children each; and much more.

In addition, a Doctor Neason Adams who seems to have been a humane and beautiful but deluded character threw in his lot with the "Apostle of Achill", as Mr. Nangle has been called and won the

affections if not the souls of the sick poor.

Some seven miles across from the Colony southwards in the wild treeless valley of the Mweelin flanked by the Minaun Cliffs, are the ruins of the site of the college already referred to.

This "Colony" was erected about the year 1845. It was described in the Achill Herald of September 1851 as containing: "A rectory, a handsome church, stewards house, a long row of cottages in all eighteen families, a school having forty scholars" and "Trinity College", itself having sixty boys selected from "thirty schools".

There was evidently a dispute between Nangle and Dallas, the founder of the Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics. Dallas took away the students and the school was closed.

Later on the cottagers left also and some of them at least, returned to the Catholic faith.

In 1852, Mr. Dallas took over from Mr. Nangle the management of the Colony, as he was worn out by anxieties.

View of the Colony and Slievemore Mountain

Chapter VIII

THE PROGRESS OF NANGLE

The founder and Apostle of Achill may have had the best of intentions and may have believed himself a vessel of election for all we know. But let us see what progress he made. In the third number of the Achill Herald dated September 20th 1837 is a letter reprinted from the Freemans Journal, which written by Father Connolly, Parish Priest of the island, gives the results of three years of Nangle's work. According to this letter, the writer calculated that twelve or fourteen thousand pounds had been received into Nangle's treasury within a few years in response to circulars (a big sum of money at that time).

The missionary returns on this investment, were the purchase of twelve adults and twenty three children, a total of thirty five out of a hungering population of about five thousand. It is true that four schools had been opened in 1835, at Dugort, Slievemore, Keel and Cashel, which at one time had been attended by three hundred and seventy six children "being" in the words of the letter referred to "induced by promises of clothes and porridge, when nakedness and hunger and unparalleled poverty shook the resolution of many". When Father Connolly wrote, two of the schools had been closed and the number of children had been reduced to twenty three, as already stated.

In Nangle's comments on the letter, he does not call in question the substantial accuracy of the figures, although he said that the number of children was greater than was represented. While admitting that he was losing ground owing to the influence of the priests and that the children were falling off, however, Mr. Nangle fires a parting shot by saying, "before entering his schools they were as ignorant and as uncivilised as the untutored savages of Central Africa, and now the flourishing plant of Christian education was blighted by the blast of antichristian influence". Such is a glimpse of the first years of Nangle's labours in Achill Island".

The great Dr. McHale had been appointed Archbishop of Tuam the year after Nangle had started his mission in Achill. The Lion of the Fold" as the bishop was called, lost no time in giving the encouragement of his magic presence to the priests and people of Achill Island. He was consecrated in 1834 and in September of the next year, he visited Achill and as I have already mentioned, he confirmed children and adults in the old Dookinella Church in 1835. During the fifty years of fight, his advice, his public letters, his money, did much to decide the issue.

Some eight or nine years passed away when Mr. & Mrs. Hall paid a visit to Achill Island. These Irish writers described in "Ireland, its Scenery and Character", what they saw in Achill, to which they had come for the very purpose of seeing for themselves the work of charity and evangelization that was being done by Mr. Nangle and of which so much had been said and so much doubt existed in the public mind. Protestants as they were, without having any motive for lying, here is their testimony. After having reviewed the work superintended by the "Apostle of Achill", they made this statement. "We consider every conscientious accession to the Protestant faith as a contribution in aid of the well-being of the State and the prosperity of Ireland more especially, but such experiments as that in Achill will be made in vain. We have shown that here it is a complete failure". And going on to explain the cause of the failure, they proceed to say in words for the sake of Achill Island should never be forgotten. "It was impossible", they say, "not to appreciate the magnanimity of the poor, miserable, utterly destitute and absolutely starving inhabitants of Achill, who were at the time of our visit enduring privations at which humanity shudders – and to know that by walking a couple of miles and professing to change their religion, they would have been instantly supplied with clothes, food, and lodging. Yet these hungry thousands, for it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say, that in the month of July last nine-tenths of the population of the island were entirely without food – preferred patiently to endure their sufferings than submit to what they considered a degradation. Such fortitude we do

believe, to be without parallel in the history of any ignorant and unenlightened people since the creation of the world".

Such was the eloquent testimony of the impartial writers who came to find out for themselves, the state of affairs in the Island, at the time.

Chapter IX

THE FAMINE YEARS

The great famine of Black '47 was a severe blow to Ireland. Many of the old friends of Father Joyce in Achill. remembered with a shudder, the scenes of those dreadful years. Fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers died and were buried, where burial was possible, where they fell. The Achill Herald of February 1847 tells us that "the distress in some of the villages is so great that people are endeavouring to maintain themselves on limpets which they gather on the rocks or boiled sea-weed." Public works were started but men at length hadn't the strength to work. Public charity, committee meal, as it was called, was distributed at Achill Sound. To this point, from all parts of the island, man and woman went for their seven pounds of meal, carried by "wagons" from Newport and Westport. The nearest workhouse was at Westport, thirty miles away and was built to accommodate a thousand people. The proselytizer found his field of labour amongst those whom the workhouse could not accommodate, and Nangle claimed all to himself. "We would", says the Herald of February 1847, "earnestly impress upon the friends of the suffering poor in Ireland, the necessity of keeping any money intended for their relief, out of the hands of the Romish priests. The best means of doing this is to make the Protestant clergy the dispensers of their bounty". A network of soup schools was now cast over the Island of Achill. Dugort and Mweelin colonies were in full swing, to which many certainly went for a time, to keep body and soul together.

It would be incredible to say that all saw food and all should die of starvation. "The Achill Colony", says the paper the "Tablet", has been doing a brisk and prosperous trade, particularly since the famine began to rage in the west of Ireland". It is true, Nangle saved the lives of many children and many families, and for this we gladly give him credit, nor have we any doubt that many were assisted unconditionally. "During the famine", says Halls Ireland, from

which we have already quoted, "there can be no denial of the fact that the Mission did much to alleviate the sufferings of the peasantry of Achill . . . And if not so successful as they could wish in securing the spiritual welfare of their neighbours, they may at least congratulate themselves in having materially improved their temporal condition". All this admitted, the general scheme of the Colonists remained unaltered and while alleviating the sorrows of earth, they did so only at a sacrifice of the dearest principles of those whom they relieved.

In May 1847, a visitor to Achill Island is quoted by the Achill Herald of that month as having written under his name in the visitor's book at the hotel in the Colony the following note, "I am astonished that English generosity could require the ignorant people to abandon the principles in which they were brought up and the creed which they understand, for food". But enough of that, lest false impressions be created and we do wrong to the deathless dead, who yielded up their lives for the purity of the faith or who preserved themselves "clean", as the natives described it, and managed to live. It is an undeniable fact that many died rather than live in dishonour, and many suffered hardships untold rather than seek relief by compromising their religion.

Chapter X

AFTER THE FAMINE

Archbishop McHale, ever watchful, purchased a part of the estate owned by a Catholic family of the McLaughlins within the island, which included Tonton Valley and Bunnacurry, the Archbishop getting possession of Bunnacurry. Dr. McHale was then in a position to establish the Franciscan Brothers in Achill Island at Bunnacurry. They converted the wild bogs and mountain sides into smiling fields.

"Dugort where in ages dreary
Nangle bold Apostle came
To corrupt the poor and weary
Soup and error to proclaim.

To oppose the Apostate voices
The monks of Holy Francis came
They were gathered round the diocese
Of Archbishop John McHale.

Achill! Where mid hill and prairie
The Monastery of Francis stands
Where the stranger cold and weary
Hospitality demands.

Where the monks in their seclusion
Tried to gather up the fold
Where by famine and oppression
Were corrupt by soup and gold.

They preserved the good from harm
Brought the wandering to the fold
They have changed their mountain farm
From dark heather to rich mould."

Knapp

The first evidence of the failure of the Colony was the departure of Mr. Nangle from Achill in the Spring of 1852. His retirement was described by Captain Dallas, who now undertook the superintendence of the missionary work, which the Apostle laid down. "After so many years of anxiety and of continual opposition from the priests around him, Mr. Nangle's health had become unequal to the exertions by which this important mission had been planted and nurtured, and on which the blessing of God had so graciously descended." After Mr. Nangle's departure from the island, his biographer tells us, speaking of the Church Mission of which Captain Dallas was the president and founder: "The Society then took over the maintenance of the whole missionary agency, including the clergymen, scripture readers and school teachers and the entire support of the Mweelin Training School." Captain Dallas, however, was unable to hold out for a longer period than two years. The game was played out. The disappearance of the famine and the consequent falling off of charities, as well as the need for them, brought the Catholic and Protestant combatants to more equal terms; and the advent of a young priest to the parish, Father James Henry, hastened the end. He is credited with having broken the power of proselytism in Achill and also built the old Belfarsad Church in 1858. Gradually but steadily, Nangle's apparent converts declared their real and ancient convictions and returned to the faith of their fathers, while Protestant services and schools were abandoned. Many, who went across the sea, were baptised or received into the Church by Catholic priests in America. In our day, the "Colony" or "missionary settlement" recalls that triumph and the generous spirit of the islanders who have resolved those troubled times, as part of our island history.

Conclusion

And so I will end this booklet with grateful thanks to Father Patrick Joyce again, who made it possible and stating that the Parish of Achill has a proud history, that Catholics of heroic faith have lived and suffered and died here, whose story I cannot fully tell. One word more and I say farewell. Who can forget or overlook the unselfish labours of the Catholic priests who under Heaven were mainly responsible for preserving in our Parish of Achill, the ancient Catholic faith for us of today? Our sincere and fervent prayer for them is: "God rest them all. God rest them well."

Lough Nakerogue

Acknowledgements

The general sources of information for this booklet are as follows:

"A Forgotten Part of Ireland" by Father Patrick Joyce (the principal source).

"The Soul of Ireland" by Rev. W. J. Lockington, S.J.

"Songs of Glen na Mona" by Brian O'Higgins.

Bedes' "Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation".

"Scoil Acla" Achill Songs and Poetry.

"An Irish Portrait" by Paul Henry.

Rev. Anthony Kilcoyne was born in Keel and has spent his priestly life in Scotland.

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